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TIN BACKGROUND BRIEFING PAPER

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CASE STUDY:NGAWANG PHULCHANG

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TIN Case Study: NGAWANG PHULCHUNG

Full transliteration: Ngag.dBang.Phul.Phyung Nationality: Tibetan Status: Monk at Drepung Monastery, Tibet Birthplace: Doelungdechen, a rural area 15 kilometres to the west of Lhasa Age: 30 or 31 Current residence: in prison serving a 19 year sentence.

Background

Ngawang Phulchung is a monk at Drepung Monastery, one of three major monasteries near Lhasa. The monastery, 6 km west of Lhasa, was re-opened ten years ago after the original institution and its occupants were destroyed by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Until 1989 he was an advanced student studying on the intensive course in Buddhist philosophy and theology that leads to the 'Geshe' or Doctor of Theology degree.

Takes part in Demonstration, 1987

On September 27th 1987 he and 20 other monks from Drepung staged an entirely peaceful demonstration in the centre of Lhasa. No-one had dared stage a simple public demonstration in Tibet for many years, and the initiative of the 21 monks sparked off a major series of protests throughout Tibet that has continued to grow ever since.

Ngawang Phulchung and the other monks, together with a number of lay people who joined the demonstration, were all beaten up by police in the street and then taken to prison. They were held without charge for four months. In January 1988 they were released following international media interest and the personal intervention of the late Panchen Lama, at that time the seniormost Tibetan official working with the Chinese.

In March 1988, less than six weeks after the Drepung monks had been released, a large number of Tibetans staged demonstrations against Chinese rule, and a number of people were shot dead by police. Around 2,000 people are thought to have been detained without charge, and subsequently tortured, in the days that followed.

Tried for printing leaflets, 1989

Within a few months Ngawang Phulchung had started to produce simple, cyclo-styled political leaflets from the monastery. In January 1989 he and three other monks - Ngawang Osel, Jamphel Changchup, and Kelsang Dhundup - formed a clandestine 'samizdat' publishing group, producing leaflets and handbills which were deeply critical of the Chinese Government.

The police discovered the secret group in the monastery in April that year. On 30th November 1989 the authorities announced in front of 1,500 people at a mass sentencing rally in Lhasa that the four men had been given jail sentences of 17 years or over for calling for independence for Tibet. The crowd was told that the monks had formed a "counter-revolutionary organisation" based at Drepung Monastery. There they had produced "reactionary literature" which attacked

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the Chinese Government and "venomously slandered our socialist system characterised by the people's democratic dictatorship."

Ngawang Phulchung was denounced as the elected leader of the group, and was sentenced to 19 years in prison, to be followed by 9 years deprivation of political rights. At the rally the Lhasa Intermediate People's Court accused him of "organising and joining a counter-revolutionary clique and spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda and inflammatory disinformation." In addition he was accused of "seriously undermining national security" by "collecting intelligence and passing it to the enemy", probably a reference to the Tibetan exile community in Northern India.

Sentenced "as a stern warning" to others

Nothing is known about the trial, if indeed there was one, or about how the prisoners were treated in prison. But it is certain that the sentences handed down to the leaflet-printers were by far the most severe given for purely political offences since unrest recommenced in Tibet in 1987. Some observers suggested that the draconian penalties may have been motivated by Chinese anger at the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama, which was due to take place in Norway ten days later.

On the day of the sentencing rally the official radio service in Lhasa broadcast a long statement about the affair which demonstrated the Government's attitude to Ngawang Phulchung and to the Group:

"The crimes committed by Ngawang Phulchung and other criminals demonstrate that the so-called human rights, freedoms and democracy played up by separatists both at home and abroad are nothing but a pack of deceitful lies.

"Deliberately planning to form counter-revolutionary organisations, putting up posters, spreading rumours and collecting information, they frenziedly conducted criminal activities to split the motherland. ...

"Ngawang Phulchung and the other criminals were formerly lamas, but they took an active part in the counter-revolutionary criminal activities of splitting the motherland. They thoroughly betrayed the religious doctrines and canons of Buddhism by their actions. They are the scum of the religious circles and are not representative of other monks and laymen. The majority of the monks and laymen love the motherland and the religion they believe in. Undoubtedly, they cannot tolerate Ngawang Phulchung and his like, who engaged in the activities of splitting the motherland under the cloak of Buddhism.

"Let the sentence on Ngawang Phulchung serve as a stern warning for separatists both at home and abroad that those who split the motherland will come to no good end."

The Literature produced by the Drepung Group

The first major publication by the Group was a complete Tibetan translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. China was not a member of the United Nations when the Universal Declaration was passed, but is considered in international law to be, in effect, a signatory to the Declaration. Nevertheless, the monks' publication of the document seems to be regarded in Chinese law as a counter-revolutionary offence (TIN Ref. 15(Q)).

A number of other documents were produced by the Drepung Group, and copies of some of these later reached the Tibet Information Network in London.

These documents show that the group was non-violent in its approach, and usually confined itself to reporting on recent dissident activity in Tibet. One broadsheet, designed to be stuck on walls in Lhasa, describes how many Tibetans had been shot dead by police at a pro-

independence demonstration the week before. The leaflet is unusual for refusing the opportunity to exaggerate the details of the massacre, and gives a restrained but powerful account of the incident.

Another informs Tibetans about support they are receiving from abroad, and gives a detailed summary of a "9 point statement specifying human rights violations by the Chinese made in the lower house of the American Assembly by Charles Rose and Benjamin Gilman" in April 1989 (TIN Ref 3(R)).

First Tibetan Political Manifesto

But the most important document yet to have reached the west from Tibet is a political manifesto written and printed by Ngawang Phulchung and his companions. The manifesto is a detailed plea for constitutional democracy. It describes at length a parliamentary system reflecting "the free will of the people" which the writers hope to see in Tibet once the Chinese leave (TIN Ref 6(J)).

Although the Chinese have repeatedly accused Tibetans of wanting to recreate the pre-1950s social system, the manifesto makes it clear that Tibetans have no intention of "reviving the old society". It emphasises that a future Tibet would be not only democratic, but would be run on secular as well as religious principles. It rejects any dynastic system, and emphasises that power must be exercised by representatives elected by all Tibetans, not just any particular class or group.

The document, which is distinctively Tibetan and does not rely on any Western ideological models, uses traditional principles of Buddhist dialectic to analyse the concept of democracy. It emphasises the Tibetans' right in international law to self-determination and to a fully democratic system. It is completely undogmatic, and avoids any incitement to anti-Chinese feeling, calling instead on Tibetans to fight "with inner strength" for an end to "foreign domination".

This is the first statement produced by Tibetans in Tibet which describes what it is they are struggling for. It is in many ways unique amongst manifestos of national liberation struggles in that it shows no interest in violence or even in bitterness against the occupying forces. It also shows that Ngawang Phulchung is deeply influenced in his political writing by Buddhist beliefs as well as by the ideas of democracy and human rights.

Investigations at the Monastery

The Drepung group produced samizdat literature from the monastery, which has 400 monks, despite being under constant surveillance during 1988. "From March 5th [1988] onwards we were told by cadres, "we are investigating here; you must confess or you will be thrown in jail." ", said one of the Group leaders in a secret interview shortly before their arrest. From 3rd September 1988, anticipating further unrest, officials from the Work Affairs Unit [Ledun Ruka] began intensive attempts at re-education of the suspect Drepung monks. Three officials were assigned to each monk to conduct the re-education process, mainly geared to proving that Tibet is part of China. Another group member reported at the time that he was told, "it won't be easy in prison next time. If you confess well you can stay in the monastery" (TIN Ref T7(F)).

In another secret interview one of the monks described the stresses placed on their religious duties by the political situation. "It is difficult for us to study with so many meetings at the monastery with the political officials," he said. "To study well requires a different kind of mind. But we ourselves have also to be concerned with politics, with independence. So now we are divided between two ways of thinking - one political, the other religious. Only after independence can we be truly monks. But now our minds are divided between politics and religion. We have to do our religious studies, but now our duty is also political work."

Ngawang Phulchung: in his own words

Several months after Ngawang Phulchung had been released from prison for his part in the demonstration of September 27th 1987, he was asked why he had decided to take part in that event. He replied:

"Because His Holiness the Dalai Lama was ... working so hard for the independence of Tibet, and because His Holiness proposed a Peace Plan in the American Congress last year, the Chinese accused His Holiness of 'splitting the motherland'. The Chinese said that Tibetans in Tibet are happy under the Chinese Communist Party and that Tibetans do not want independence. But we Tibetans in Tibet are not happy under Chinese rule, and we do not agree with what the Chinese have said. It was because of these things, and also to support His Holiness, that we decided to hold the 27th September demonstration."

He and the other monks in the publishing group were asked if they had been frightened when they went to Lhasa to begin that demonstration:

"No, we were not frightened. We thought that the worst thing that the Chinese could do was either to kill us, or to put us in prison. But we were already prepared to give up our lives for the 6 million Tibetans. Anyway, sacrificing your life is not against Buddhism."

His background:

"I am from a poor family with five children. I did not get much time to go to school because I had to work. But I learnt Tibetan, mostly by teaching myself, although I was still not able to read [formal] handwriting or newspapers. With my little knowledge of Tibetan I was able to get admission to a monastery as a monk."

On conditions as a registered monk in the monastery:

"A registered monk has to work at least for a period of two to three years. If any monk refuses to work the Chinese will not allow them to stay in the monasteries. Some monks have to work for 5 years; the duration of work for the monks varies. Because the monks have to work they do their religious studies in the mornings and in the evenings. We have to abide by the rules of the monasteries in order to get time for religious studies. The Chinese tell us that the monks should be apolitical; we try follow the rules and regulations of the monasteries and keep our vows."

"It is not easy to study religion because you can't say, 'I want to study religion' and not go to the labour unit. The Chinese had said that they would increase the amount of time allowed for religious studies, but they have not increased it yet. They are more interested in politics; they do not care about religious studies and monasteries."

"We are allowed to go to Lhasa or anywhere else only for one day, and ... then only with permission from the higher authorities of the monastery. We have to return within the day whether it is Lhasa we are going to or anywhere else. If we don't come back within two to three days the Chinese fine us."

"The Chinese object us to gathering together. They say that it is no use making idle talk if it creates political problems. They warn us not to stay with others Their main objection is that we should not get involved in political activities."

NB: TIN has photos of the monks and original texts of leaflets

